ART CANADA INSTITUTE | INSTITUT DE L'ART CANADIEN

DECEMBER 3, 2021

FACES OF OUR TIME

PHOTOGRAPHS OF YOUSUF KARSH

Yousuf Karsh is one of the greatest portrait photographers of the twentieth century. A new exhibition at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts explores how the unrivalled talent and distinctive style of this famed Canadian artist made him sought after by the most influential figures of his era.

"The heart and mind are the true lens of the camera," the revered Armenian Canadian photographer Yousuf Karsh (1908–2002) often said. His deep sensitivity towards his subjects explains his unparalleled ability to capture the humanity and interior lives of famous and formidable individuals. *The World of Yousuf Karsh: A Private Essence*, curated by Hilliard T. Goldfarb at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, is now on view at the gallery until January 30, 2022. It explores Karsh's life and celebrated sixty-year career through over one hundred indelible portraits of such notable Canadian and international figures as Winston Churchill, Muhammad Ali, Glenn Gould, and Karen Kain. The photographs below, featured in the exhibition, demonstrate how this singular artist simultaneously idealized his subjects and, by recording a meaningful look or gesture at a precise moment, revealed their true essence.

Sara Angel
Founder and Executive Director, Art Canada Institute

YOUSUF AND ESTRELLITA KARSH

Yousuf Karsh, *Yousuf and Estrellita Karsh at Little Wings, Their Home in Ottawa*, 1967, Estate of Yousuf Karsh.

Yousuf Karsh and his second wife, Estrellita Karsh, are pictured here in their home in Ottawa—an Art Deco bungalow on a four-acre property where they regularly hosted lavish parties that drew celebrity guests. By 1967, life for Karsh was radically different from when he arrived in Ottawa in 1932 and set up his first photography studio. Eight years prior, he had landed in Canada alone as a sixteen-year-old after fleeing the Armenian Genocide with his family. Karsh lived in Sherbrooke, Quebec, with his photographer uncle, George Nakash, who sparked his passion for the medium and arranged for Karsh to apprentice with the prominent Armenian American photographer John Garo (1868-1939) in Boston in 1928. After two years of honing his technical skills, Karsh returned to Sherbrooke briefly before relocating to Ottawa.

Learn more about the exhibition

WINSTON CHURCHILL

Yousuf Karsh, *Winston Churchill*, 1941, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

Ottawa was the prime spot for Karsh to develop a clientele comprising the political and social elite. In 1941 he produced an iconic portrait of British Prime Minister Winston Churchill that rocketed him to international fame. After giving an impassioned speech to the House of Commons about the attack on Pearl Harbor (which brought the United States into the Second World War), Churchill was brought to the Speaker's Chamber, where Karsh was waiting to take his picture. Unaware of these plans, the disgruntled leader "chomp[ed] vigorously at his cigar," recounted Karsh. He continued, "I stepped toward him and, without premeditation, but ever so respectfully, I said, 'Forgive me, sir,' and plucked the cigar out of his mouth. By the time I got back to my camera, he looked so belligerent he could have devoured me. It was at that instant that I took the photograph."

Learn more about the exhibition

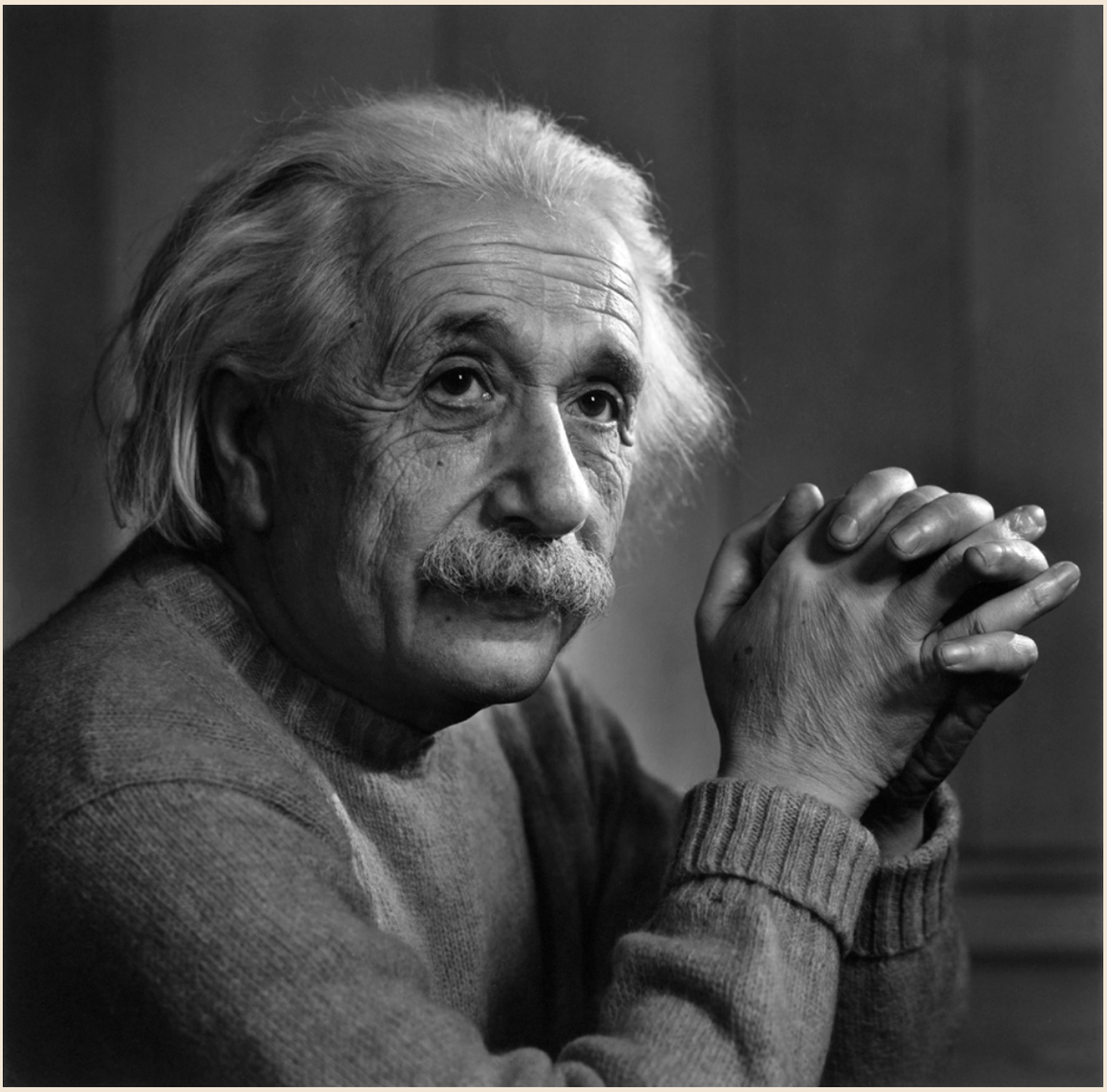
GLENN GOULD

Yousuf Karsh, *Glenn Gould*, 1957, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

The legendary classical pianist Glenn Gould was among the luminaries of Canadian culture who posed for Karsh. “While I photographed Glenn Gould at his Toronto home, in 1957, he never stopped playing the piano for a moment,” said Karsh. “The music, Bach and Alban Berg, was so arresting that I found myself captivated, forgetful of camera shutters and lights.” The photographer ultimately captured this portrait of the musical genius playing the piano, his slightly parted lips suggestive of his widely known habit of humming and singing during his performances. Gould’s head and hands and the piano keys are brightly illuminated in contrast to the dark background. The photograph illustrates Karsh’s mastery of lighting and the gelatin silver process—skills he acquired under the tutelage of John Garo in Boston.

Learn more about the exhibition

ALBERT EINSTEIN



Yousuf Karsh, *Albert Einstein*, February 11, 1948, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

In 1948 Karsh achieved his longstanding dream of photographing world-renowned physicist and Nobel Prize winner Albert Einstein, resulting in a famous image of the man known for his theory of relativity and equation $E=mc^2$. Gazing slightly upward at something beyond the frame, Einstein's kind eyes are matched by the hint of a smile beneath his thick moustache. "At Princeton's Institute for Advanced Study, I found Einstein a simple, kindly, almost childlike man, too great for any of the postures of eminence," said Karsh. "One did not have to understand his science to feel the power of his mind or the force of his personality." Einstein was among the first faculty members of the Institute for Advanced Study, and he settled there in 1933 after fleeing Nazi Germany the previous year.

Learn more about the exhibition

INGRID BERGMAN

Yousuf Karsh, *Ingrid Bergman*, 1946, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

In 1946 Karsh received his first commission from *Life* magazine to shoot portraits of Hollywood stars, including Elizabeth Taylor, Judy Garland, Humphrey Bogart, and Ingrid Bergman, who is shown here. The Swedish-born actress dominated Hollywood cinema during the 1940s, appearing in such celebrated films as *Casablanca* (1942), *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1943), and *Gaslight* (1944), for which she won her first Academy Award for Best Actress. Bergman was as beloved for her exceptional talent as her radiant beauty, which Karsh emphasizes in this photograph through his meticulous attention to lighting. Over the course of his career, Karsh's portraits were featured on twenty covers of *Life*, the premier American pictorial periodical for much of the twentieth century.

Learn more about the exhibition

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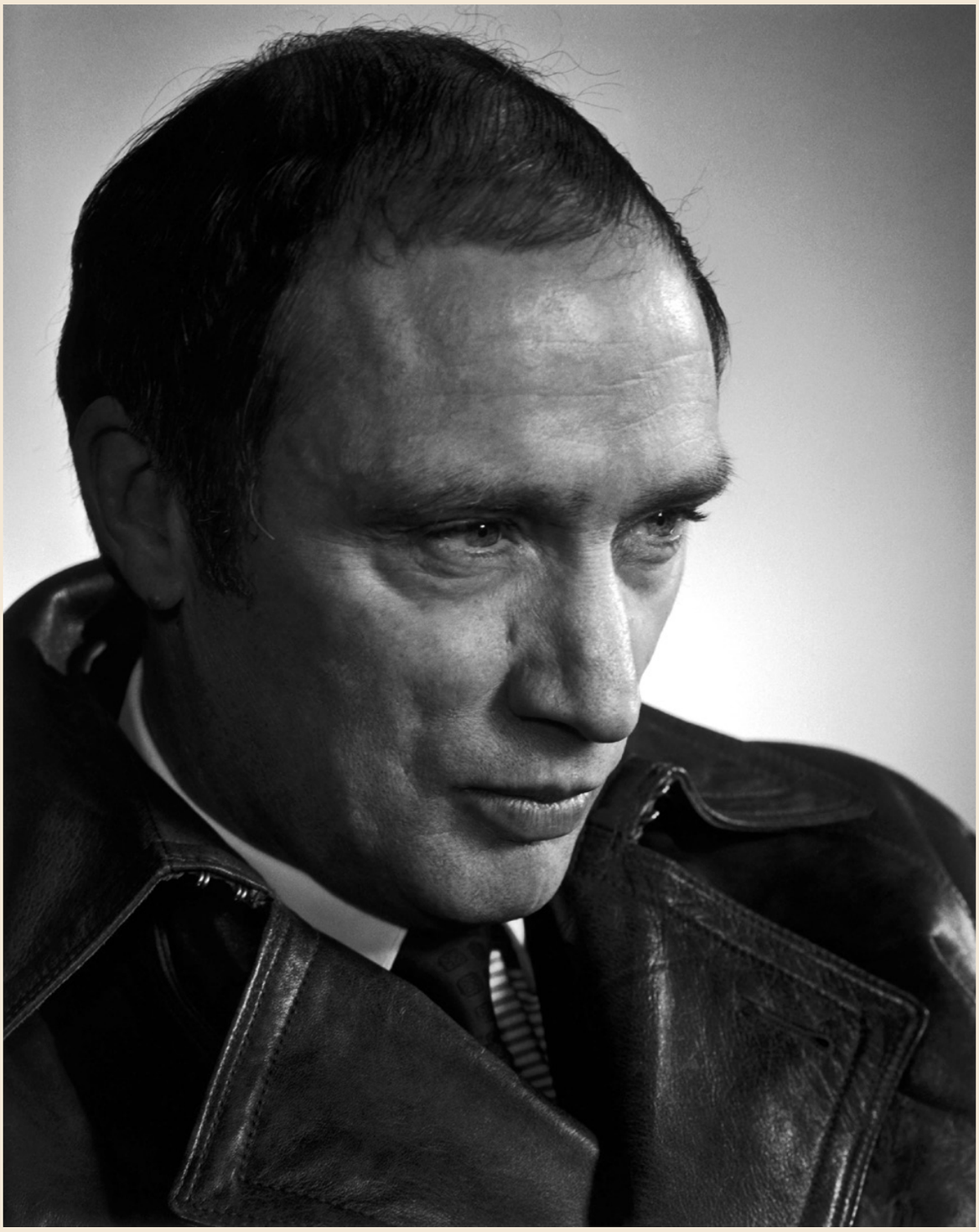
PIERRE ELLIOTT TRUDEAU

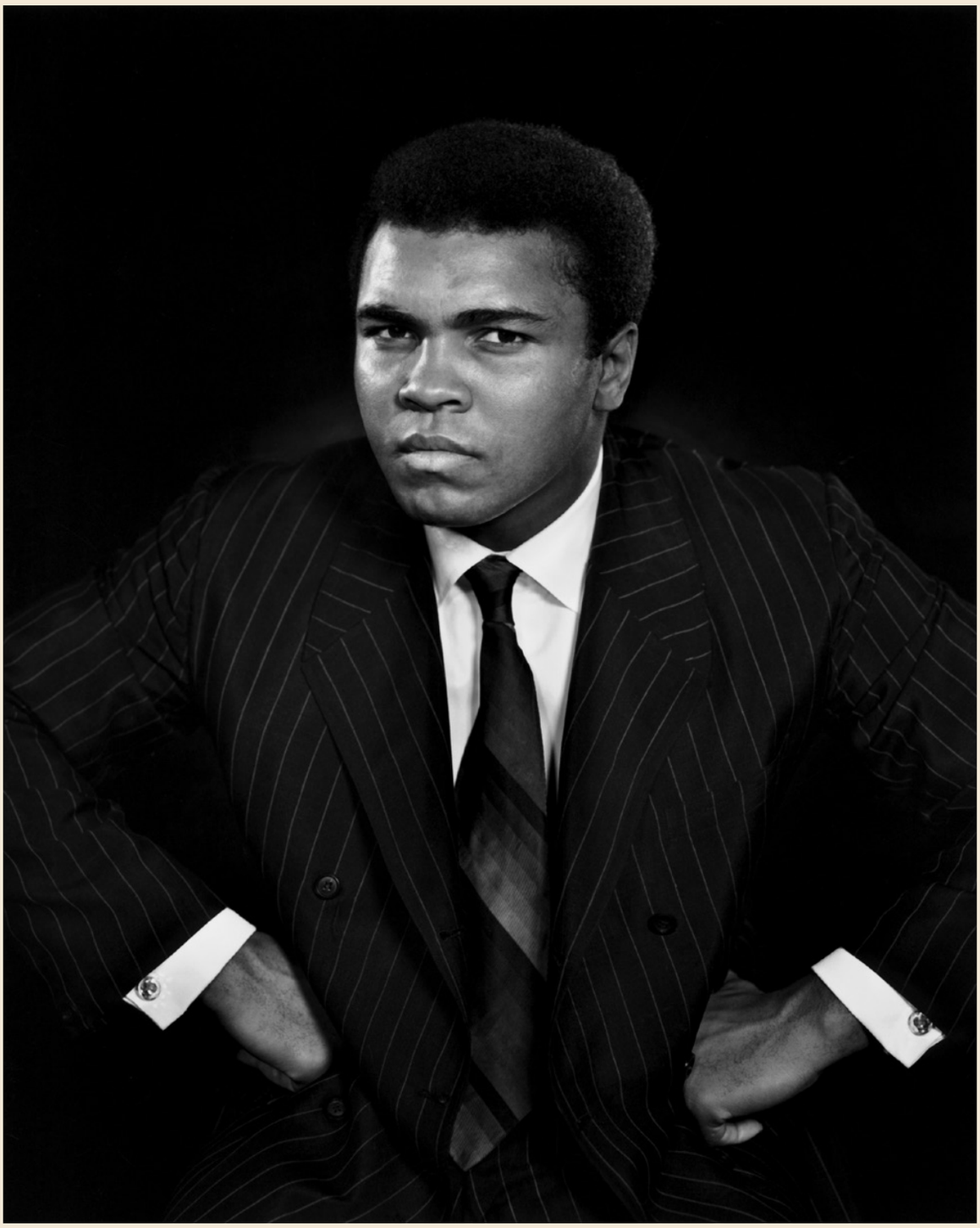


Yousuf Karsh, *Pierre Elliott Trudeau*, 1968, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

Karsh produced this portrait of Pierre Elliott Trudeau shortly after he became Canada's prime minister in 1968, when the nation was gripped by Trudeaumania—a fervour ignited by his charisma and progressive politics during his Liberal leadership campaign earlier that year. Trudeau's glamorous lifestyle, which included driving sports convertibles and dating high-profile women, attracted a degree of public fascination typically reserved for celebrities. Here Karsh captures the intensity of Trudeau's gaze, reflecting the visionary leader's determination to reshape Canada into a just and multicultural society. "When I photographed Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau…the voters already had found him compelling…but not yet controversial," says Karsh. "The discovery of his many-faceted nature was to come later—a partial discovery, I suspect, because the Canadian people may never fully understand him."

Learn more about the exhibition

MUHAMMAD ALI



Yousuf Karsh, *Muhammad Ali*, 1970, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

Muhammad Ali is regarded as the greatest heavyweight boxer of all time, yet when Karsh photographed him for *Look* magazine's "Under 30" series in 1970, he had not fought a match in three years. In 1966, the rising athlete, who was Muslim, refused to be drafted into the military during the Vietnam War on religious and ethical grounds. He was subsequently convicted of draft evasion (which was ultimately overturned), banned from boxing, and stripped of his heavyweight title. While he appealed the decision, Ali remained busy with numerous commitments, and Karsh found that he arrived to the shoot with a hefty portable phone that allowed him to be in "constant contact with the world." Karsh added, "The pinstriped suit he wore for our sitting was chosen not for business but to command the respect he rightly felt he deserved."

Learn more about the exhibition

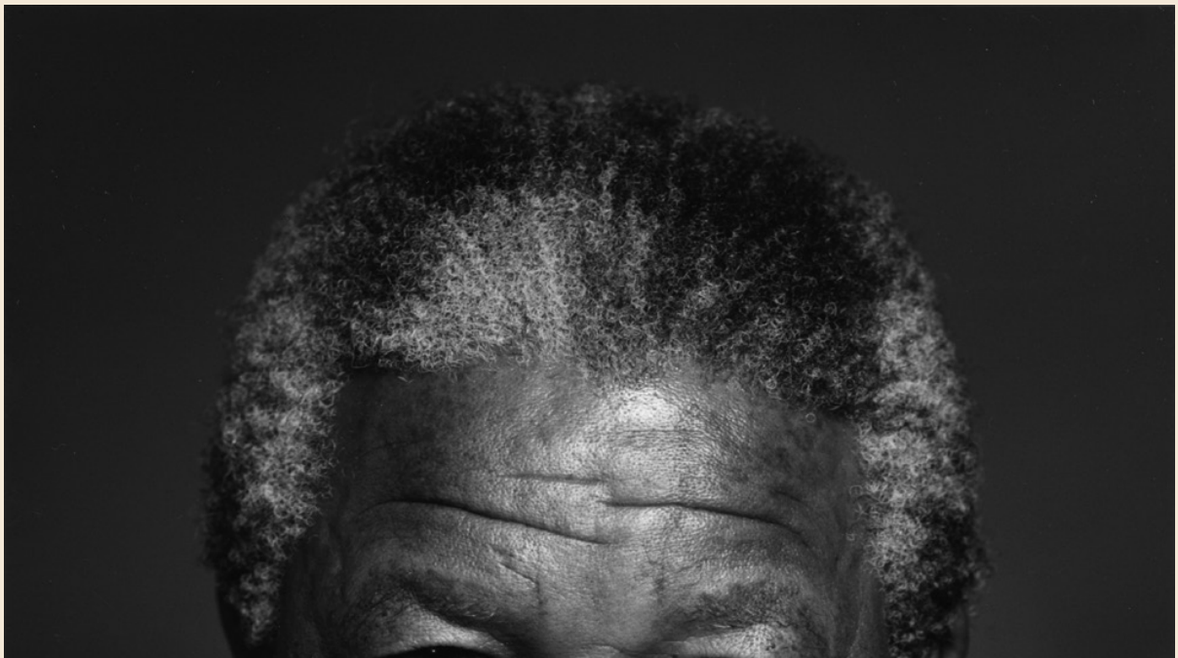
KAREN KAIN

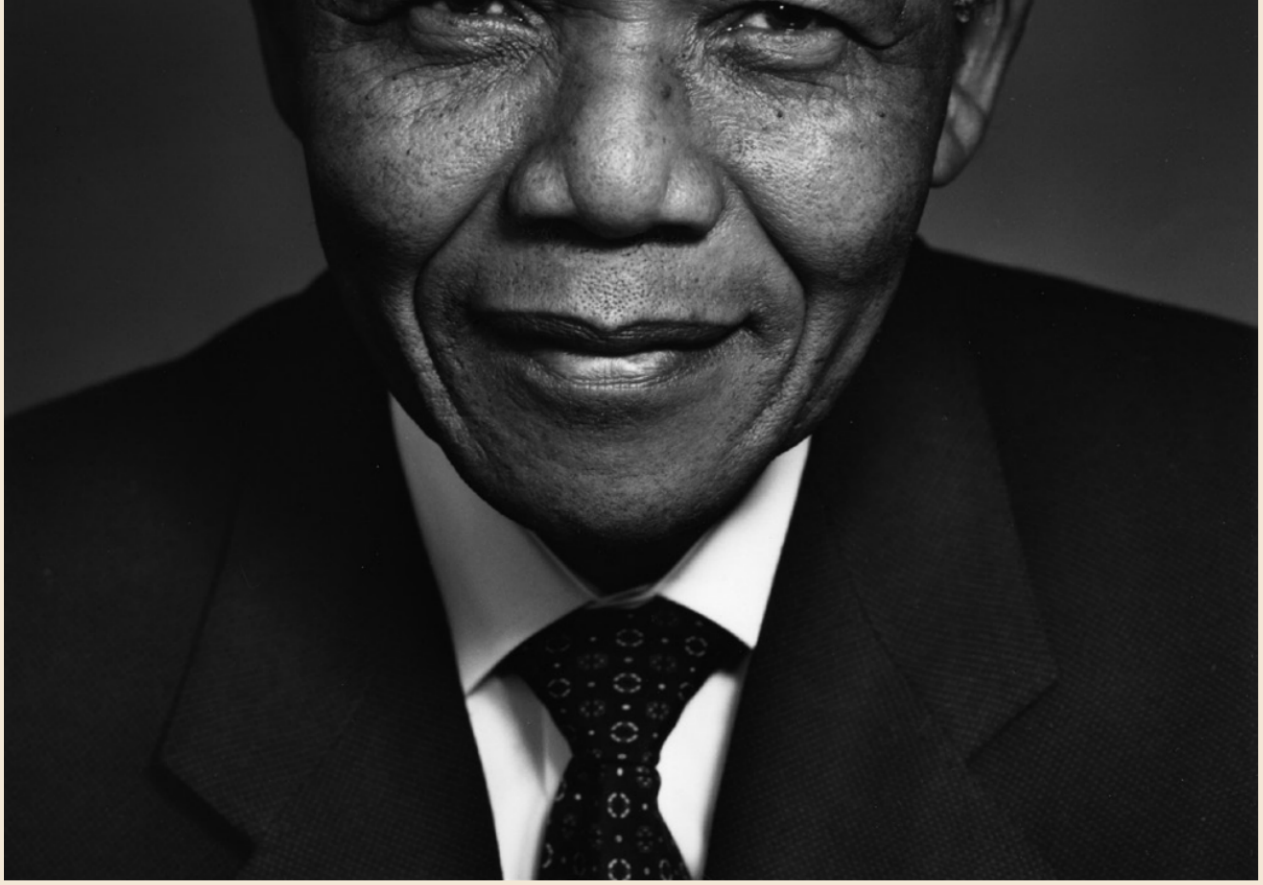
Yousuf Karsh, *Karen Kain*, 1977, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

One of Canada's greatest ballet dancers, Karen Kain had an extraordinary fifty-year career at the National Ballet of Canada that concluded this year when she stepped down as Artistic Director. After joining the company in 1969 as part of the Corps de Ballet, the Hamilton native soon became a Principal Dancer following her astounding debut in *Swan Lake*, and by the time Karsh photographed her in 1977 she was internationally revered. Karsh was struck by Kain's seemingly effortless movements, and by her disclosure to him that "to project the illusion of lightness on the stage…a dancer endures almost constant physical pain." He took multiple exposures of Kain to accurately record her "elegant and decisive steps." The resulting image, declared Karsh, "is proof of her complete victory over the physical limitations of her art."

Learn more about the exhibition

NELSON MANDELA





Yousuf Karsh, *Nelson Mandela*, 1990, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

"The first time I watched Yousuf at work was a revelation," writes Estrellita Karsh, referring to his remarkable ability to put his subjects at ease. This skill proved to be particularly useful the day that Karsh met and photographed esteemed South African social rights activist and politician Nelson Mandela in his studio at the Château Laurier in 1990. As the story goes: "Brian Mulroney greeted Mandela at the airport and accompanied him to the Château Laurier.... When the session started an hour later, Mandela was warm and friendly but obviously very tired. Yousuf then told him a story about Pope John XXIII. He had asked the Pontiff, 'How many people work in the Vatican?' The Pope smiled and replied, 'About half.' Mandela looked a little blank. Suddenly he got the joke, slapped the table, and roared with laughter. And, everything about the sitting changed."

Learn more about the exhibition

THE WORLD OF YOUSUF KARSH: A PRIVATE ESSENCE

View from the exhibition *The World of Yousuf Karsh: A Private Essence*.

The World of Yousuf Karsh: A Private Essence showcases Estrellita Karsh's recent generous donation of 111 gelatin silver prints by Karsh to the MMFA. This gift is made all the more remarkable by the fact that the museum previously owned only one work by the master photographer in its collection—an image of internationally acclaimed Quebec painter Jean Paul Riopelle (1923–2002)—donated by Karsh himself in 1991. Now, the MMFA's exceptional collection represents every stage of his career, and in *The World of Yousuf Karsh* his portraits of notable political and cultural figures are situated alongside his early works, when he was experimenting with different styles, and his commissioned images of Canadian workers and cities in the 1950s, offering a comprehensive view of Karsh's oeuvre. In the spring, the exhibition will be travelling to the Canadian Museum of Immigration at Pier 21 in Halifax, where it will be on view from March 14 to October 16, 2022.

Learn more about the exhibition

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